August 15, 2021

Rick Myatt

IT’S PEACH SEASON!

1 Peter 4:8-11

My brother, Jerry, came over to our house one day this week to mow our lawn. He has been doing that because his little brother has significant issues with allergies and consequent sinus problems. Mowing the lawn could set off a spiral that could make life miserable for me for many weeks. Since our yard is about the size of a beach blanket Jerry insisted it would not be a problem for him to mow it. But this week he planned to start by doing some trimming with a weed whacker. But when he picked it up he found there was something stuck to the bottom of it. It turned out that our pest control person had left a rat trap in our garage several months back, and the weed whacker had been set down on top of it. Jerry didn’t know what it was, but when he tried to pull it off he only managed to get some sticky stuff all over his hands. When I told him that was a rat trap he became concerned that he now had poison on his hands. He washed his hands vigorously multiple times, but the sticky stuff would not come off. We looked for answers on the Internet, but that was not very helpful. In the end we learned that he did not have poison on his hands but a non-toxic glue. Jerry went through all that because he loves his brother and wanted to serve him. He got more than he bargained for, but his example is a good reminder for all of us. We will see why today as we look at 1 Peter 4:8-11.

ABOVE ALL ELSE, LOVE

In verse 7 Peter wrote, “the end of all things is near.” We live right on the edge of eternity because the coming of Jesus could happen at any moment. We need to live in the reality of that immediacy. Peter reminds us that Christ’s coming is not just something that could happen off in the future. It might, but it is also true that it could happen before this day is done. Jesus’ coming will be a surprise precisely because we don’t think it is actually going to happen. Most of us accepted the idea that a pandemic was likely to occur “some day,” but I have lived all my life hearing about that possibility without it ever happening. It was a bit like the disease equivalent of the big earthquake that’s going to destroy California. It could happen, they say it’s bound to happen, but it never happens. That is, until 2020. The thing we knew could happen but didn’t believe would, happened. And so it will be with the coming of Christ.

My point here is to impart a sense of urgency to what Peter is telling us. I always have this sense of pressure this time of year for a couple of reasons. One reason is I love summer and the sunny, warm days. Our mailman, who is a wonderful guy, recently asked me if I’ve been to the beach. I said we’ve been so busy we haven’t. He said we should go, that the water was warm. So I get this sense that I don’t want to waste this time. I need to make the most of the warm beach days, and get down to the beach. Another thing about summer is it is peach season. For about a month we can have fresh, delicious peaches. I want to eat peaches as much as possible because when late August arrives, peach season is over. My obsession is, when it’s peach season, eat peaches! The sense we should have in light of the fact that “the end of all things is near” is kind of like that. We are in a limited season and we should want to make the most of the season, especially because we don’t know when it will end.

A crucial way to do that, according to Peter, is to love one another deeply. In fact, he says this is what we should do above all. Other than worshiping and obeying God, this is what matters most. This should not be news to a follower of Jesus. We see that message a lot in the Bible. Jesus said that the most important thing we must do is to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, but he said the second most important thing is to love your neighbor as yourself.

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 Paul said a person could do miraculous things but if they do those things without love, it would amount to nothing. A pastor could be a dynamic leader, a charismatic speaker, could build a church of thousands of people, but if he does it for some reason other than to love people, the whole thing is a waste. A person could make millions of dollars and donate incredible sums of money to the Lord’s work, but if he does it without love, it is useless.

Paul said if we do things we think are great, but we do them without love, then we are nothing more than a noisy gong. Think of your least favorite noises. A car alarm blaring endlessly, chalk squeaking on a blackboard, a person who keeps talking loudly during a movie in the theater, the baby screaming in the row behind you on the airplane. Paul said that a person who acts without love is like that.

I once observed an interaction in which Laurie showed a lot of wisdom and courage. It was years ago in a conversation with a guy who was on the staff of the church I was serving at the time. This guy was big on being “authentic” in relationships, which he interpreted to mean he had to always say what he really thought. He had said some hurtful things. Laurie confronted him about this and he said, “Well, I have to say what I really feel.” Laurie then said, “What about 1 Corinthians 13? Doesn’t that say that loving the other person should determine what you say, and if you don’t, you’re nothing but a noisy gong?” He admitted she had a point.

Why does God make loving others such a priority? For one reason, lack of love is the cause of an incomprehensible amount of pain in the world. Every time you have been hurt by another person, it was because that individual was not loving you at that moment. Because God loves people, he doesn’t want them to be hurt. A crucial way to keep them from being hurt is for other people to love them. Another reason that God wants us to love others is God’s people are supposed to reflect his character. Remember what 1 John 4:8 said. “God is love.” Love is essential to who God is. It is behind everything he does. His wisdom, his holiness, his goodness, his grace, his justice, his faithfulness, are all driven by love. So you should be able to say about me, Rick Myatt is love. When we are even slightly unloving towards any person, we are declaring something about God that is not true.

Sadly, love can be a slippery subject. Most people think of themselves as loving persons, but somehow manage to do or say unloving things. God doesn’t want us to talk about loving, or to pretend like we are loving, or to just label ourselves loving, he wants us to actually love. These verses show us some practical aspects of what it means to love other people.

First, Peter tells us love covers over a multitude of sins. What does he mean by this? I recently read an article from *The Atlantic* magazine about the Hawaii Space Exploration Analog and Simulation, called Hi-Seas. There is a small dome on Mauna Loa on the big island of Hawaii at 8,000 feet. It sits in a barren landscape that resembles Mars. For the past 5 years NASA and the University of Hawaii have been sending teams of 6 people to live isolated in that dome for months at a time, in one case for a year, in order to simulate a mission to Mars. They are seeking to discover how humans react to a situation like that and how to create the best possibility for success. The article reported on one thing they have learned from these studies. People get on each other’s nerves, and they do it a lot.

When human beings are interacting with each other there will be sins. There will likely be a multitude of sins. Love is needed to cover over those sins. One of my favorite old romantic comedies is *While You Were Sleeping*. The whole premise of the story is based on the main character trying to cover up a mistaken impression she had given that she was engaged to a man who was now in a coma. There’s a scene in the movie that illustrates this cover over idea. The main character, played by Sandra Bulllock, is helping the brother of her supposed love interest, move a sofa into his brother’s ultra modern, expensive apartment. In the process they knock over a vase, causing a bad stain on the white carpet. The brother says, “I think the sofa should go right there.” They put the sofa on the stain to cover it up.

Is Peter saying we are supposed to a cover up for other people and try to hide the truth about them? Laurie and I flew up to the Seattle area this week to celebrate her dad’s 90th birthday. We haven’t flown anywhere in a couple of years and thus failed to appropriately prepare for this trip. We usually try to have something to watch and bring some headphones to cut out some of the noise. We forgot all of that. It was a mistake. Seated behind us on the flight were 3 younger women who clearly had been drinking alcohol before they boarded the plane and continued on the flight. They talked incessantly throughout the flight more loudly than I’ve ever heard anyone talk on a plane. They were vulgar, inane, obnoxious and unrelenting. It was quite a performance. Does loving them mean excusing their behavior or pretending they were not rude, obnoxious and boorish?

No, that’s not the point. We get a bit more perspective on what he means when Peter said we should offer hospitality to others without grumbling. The Greek word for hospitality here could be translated “love of strangers.” Some scholars say this word does not mean entertaining friends in your home, but opening your home to strangers. However, Peter specifically says we are to do this for “one another.” In other words, it is for people we know. The scholars fail to note the word for stranger can just mean “other.” What is interesting about this phrase is that Peter says we should be hospitable “without grumbling.” The Greek word for grumbling is an onomatopoeia, meaning it sounds like what it is. The Greek word is *gongusmou*. It sounds like when people grumble under their breath. We are to be hospitable without gongusmouing. He is alluding to the fact that the human tendency is to find fault with people. We have them in our home and we may enjoy them, but we mentally tick off what is wrong with them. This is the reverse of what Peter says love does, which is to cover over sins.

This is not about pretending not to see the faults of others or of living in denial or trying to hide the truth. It is about looking at people in a completely different way. God sees our faults in high definition. He doesn’t miss a single one. But he loves us anyway, and he doesn’t dwell on our faults. He showers them with grace and instead looks at our immense value to him.

We have a new member of our family, little Bria, now almost 6 months old. I’m going to be brutally honest about that little girl. She is a delightful child, but she has some very unattractive traits. She is utterly self-focused. She never inquires about the welfare of others and never seeks to serve anyone. All she cares about is what she wants. If she doesn’t get what she wants in short order, she doesn’t show patience, she doesn’t politely request assistance, she begins howling, and keeps at it until she gets what she wants. Oh, and she has some terrible personal hygiene. She doesn’t go to the restroom to deal with bodily waste. She just lets it rip wherever she happens to be. And don’t even get me started about the drooling.

When I was a young single man I observed some of these traits in babies and wanted to have as little as possible to do with those of Bria’s ilk. But love covers over a multitude of sins. When you become a parent, that child is so precious to you, so loved, that you overlook these things. They are not the things you focus on. Oh, yes, you see them. You couldn’t miss them. But the child is so precious to you that your love for the child eclipses the sometimes unpleasant characteristics of an infant. Changing a nasty diaper is still disgusting, but you do it willingly.

Loving someone means believing the best about a person, but maybe even more than that, it is choosing to see the things that matter about the person. It is choosing to focus on their value and their beauty. That’s what God does with us. He knows about our shortcomings. He sees the wrong that is in all of us, but he focuses on how much he loves us and values us. He chooses to delight in us. That’s what love does. Just like a parent sees a baby’s innate selfishishness and the rather unpleaseant aspects of being an infant and those things don’t matter at all to them. That is how Peter tells us to love.

He says we are to love deeply. The word translated deeply actually could be better translated “strenuously.” We have seen that before in this letter. In this case it means making a deliberate hard choice to cover over the sins of others and not grumble about them. Let’s just be clear that when we are gongussmouing about people we are not covering their sins, and thus we are not loving them. When we love people we are for them. We are in their corner. We want the best for them and we accept and love them as they are.

USE WHAT YOU ARE GIVEN

There is no more effective and powerful way to impact other people than to love them. But if we love them strenuously it means we will actually be doing something. That’s what Peter brings up next. He tells us to use whatever gift we have received to serve other people. This is where people often take a passage that is about serving others and turning it into a self focused message. It is common to hear people talk about how we need to find out what our spiritual gifts are so we can use them to serve other people. So the focus becomes on discovering what my gifts are. It becomes about me. Peter does not say we need to find out what our spiritual gifts are. In fact, no passage of Scripture says we should do that. It merely says people are all given different gifts and all of them are needed.

The common understanding of spiritual gifts actually creates a bit of tension with an important passage of Scripture. Typically, spiritual gifts are understood as abilities and strengths given to us by God to enable us to serve others in his name. The tension comes when we look at 2 Corinthians 12:9. There Paul said as he asked God to take away his “thorn in the flesh,” whatever it was, God did not give him what he asked. Instead he said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Think about that for a moment. Paul was asking God to take away this thing that was tormenting him because he felt it made him less able to minister to people. God told him that thing was there to remind him that what made him adequate for ministry in his name was God’s grace. We are to depend on that alone, not on our abilities or our gifts. In fact, God’s power is perfected in weakness. It is not perfected by our abilities. It is only when we are unable and inadequate that we depend totally on God’s grace that God’s power comes into play.

Think about some of the people who played crucial roles in God’s plan. Moses was the greatest prophet and leader in the Old Testament. Do you remember what his response was when God called him to lead Israel? He didn’t think he could do it. According to Exodus 4:1 when God told him to lead the nation he first said, “What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you’?” God answered by enabling him to perform a couple of quickie miracles, which should have convinced him to do what God told him to do. But in Exodus 4:10 Moses said, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” Boy, can I relate to that. God’s response was “who made people able to talk? Oh, wait, that would be me, wouldn’t it?” In other words, it’s not about you and your abilities or inabilities, Moses. It’s about who I am. It’s not hard to see why. If Moses had depended on his gifts, what would he have done when he led Israel to a place where they were trapped on the shore of the Red Sea? What would he have done when they were out in the wilderness when they ran out of water and then food? Only God’s power could solve those problems. If Moses depended on his gifts and charismatic leadership they all would have died.

Do you remember when Jesus had a massive crowd of thousands of people following him out in a wilderness area and they were getting hungry? Luke 9:12-13 says, “Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him (Jesus) and said, ‘Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here.’ He replied ‘You give them something to eat.’” Why would he say that? Because he wanted them to face the fact that what was needed was light years beyond their ability. They found out that only the power of God could deal with that situation. Using the best of their abilities they could do exactly zero about that situation. Their best plan was to send everybody away. Only by relying completely on Jesus’ power could they do anything about the situation.

This was what God was teaching Paul in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul knew the Hebrew Scriptures and rabbinic theology better perhaps than any other Jew of his day. And his arguments could run circles around any Jewish challenger. So where did God send him? To Gentiles. With them, all of Paul’s abilities were about as useful as a life raft in the desert. Paul had despised Gentiles. So God sent him to people he seemed utterly ill-suited to reach. The only hope for him to minister to them effectively was God’s grace.

Human abilities can only accomplish that which is within human capacity to do. It can’t do what the power of God and the grace of God can do. It can build impressive organizations that do spectacular things. Humans do that all the time. Just look at Apple, Microsoft, Google, Amazon, General Motors and all the rest. Unfortunately, we tend to look at what people always look at and evaluate ministries, for instance, on much the same basis that people of the world evaluate organizations. It is difficult to see what the grace of God is doing because it is not always visible to the human eye and it is measured by a very different scoreboard than the one we nearly always use.

Peter’s message is, whatever God has given you, use it to serve other people. This is the principle that is being stressed here. Whatever you have, it is a stewardship. Your very body is a gift from God. Your brain and your tongue are gifts from God. This day is a gift from God. Whatever resources you have in this world, they are a gift from God. God wants you to use them to serve other people, not to satisfy or protect yourself. Loving others, serving them with whatever God has given you, is the priority. That is what it means to love others.

Love means acting to do good for the one loved. That’s what Peter is saying here. Use the things that God has given you, your body, your brain, your mouth, your time, your money, whatever you are able to do, to care for them, encourage them, meet their needs, build them up. You are to use everything you have to do everything you can to serve other people.

The *Washington Post* published an article in June relating a story that happened in Louisiana. Hahnville High School had a dress code for the boys graduating. They were to wear a white shirt, tie, dress pants and dark dress shoes. Daverius Peters thought he was obeying the code, but when he arrived at the site for the graduation ceremony he was told his shoes did not meet the code. Peters was shocked and humiliated. He just wanted to walk across the stage and get his diploma. A man named John Butler, who worked at the school and was there to see his own daughter graduate, observed what happened. Butler tried to intervene on Peters’ behalf, but the woman in charge refused to budge. So Butler decided it was up to him to help Peters out. He gave him his own shoes, which met the standard. They were too big for Deverius because Butler wears size 11 shoes and Peters wears size 9, but they allowed Peters to participate. Butler attended his daughter’s graduation wearing socks on his feet. He loved another person strenuously by using what God had given him, in that case shoes, to serve.

He gave a small part of what he had to help someone else, but sometimes love demands more. Peter says whatever you have, remember it is a gift from God, and remember it is a stewardship. He wants you to use it to serve others. That’s true of your money, time, resources, and your abilities.

But what about me? That’s our biggest problem. We are always thinking in those terms and asking that question. Don’t I need to take care of myself first? Don’t I get what I want? What do you suppose God’s answer to that question is? It is, “My grace is sufficient for you.” In other words, “I’m taking care of you. Leave that to me, and you go serve others.”

SERVE IN GOD’S STRENGTH

That is an unnatural way to live for human beings. Our nature has a strong element of self-preservation. We just automatically think, “What do I get out of it?” We don’t have to choose it. It’s just there. It is as automatic as breathing. To live counter to that, to think, “God will take care of me, so how can I love and serve others,” requires that we make hard choices. It is scary sometimes.

So how are we supposed to consistently live that way? Peter tells us we need to serve in God’s strength. That makes sense. He has unlimited strength, so there is more than sufficient supply for us. But what does that mean? How do we live and serve in God’s strength? Christians say that kind of thing all the time, but how do I practice that in real life? I thought about our daughter in law, Anna. She and Toby have 3 little girls, ages 5, 4 and 6 months. Ella, the 5 year old, is extremely verbal, meaning she talks non-stop. Plus she is extremely gregarious with an insatiable social need. In other words, she wants interaction from the moment she wakes up until she falls asleep at night. Cara, the 4 year old has two physical health issues that have delayed her development and have made her a challenge at times. But now she also is becoming very verbal, and she has to be taken to therapy sessions 4 times a week. Then there is Bria, the baby, who is, well, a baby, with all the demands that entails. Anna is the primary care giver for these 3, and on top of it she has a job. Laurie and I took care of the girls for a few hours two days in a row last weekend. To say we were exhausted would be like saying it is a bit warm in Death Valley this time of year. I tried to imagine what it would be like to face that every single day. It occurred to me that both survival and sanity would be at risk. How do you have the strength and endurance to keep doing that day after day?

First we have to ask what that strength would look like. Is it some supernatural power that enables us to leap tall buildings in a single bound or to be faster than a speeding bullet? Clearly that is not right. God’s strength will mainly be manifested in our being able to do what he wants us to do, in this case to love and serve others, and to keep on doing it even when it is difficult and our resources feel low. That mostly has to do with something inside us.

Ephesians 3:16 speaks to this reality. There Paul wrote, “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.” Where we need God’s power is in our inner being. It is inside. How do we get it there? Isaiah 40:29-31 are familiar, powerful words. “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall” (which surely means that grandparents are going to die in a pile), “But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

What does it mean to hope in the Lord? It means a couple of things. First, and you’ve heard this somewhere before, it means to trust that God will give us what we need. In other words, what God supplies is enough. When we hope in the Lord we believe that what he gives us in his grace is sufficient to give us his acceptance and his eternal life. It means we believe it means he will be with us in the situation that we face. It means being at peace with who we are because of what he gives us in Christ. In Ephesians 3:14-19 Paul linked being strengthened in the inner being with being rooted in God’s love. The more we are grounded in God’s unconditional love for us, the more we will be filled with his fullness, including his strength.

Second, to hope in the Lord means that we hope in God’s power to bring about his purposes in the world. That means as I face a tiring or daunting situation, I put my hope in God making it come out right, not in my ability to control things and force things to have the outcome that I want them to have. One of the most de-motivating and tiring factors is when we think it is up to us to achieve a certain outcome, and we fear we can’t do it. When we hope in the Lord, we believe the outcome is up to him. We trust in him to bring about the ends that he wants. Our job, then, is just to be faithful to him. We leave the results to him. That really takes the pressure off us, and it is pressure that grinds us down.

As I mentioned, we flew to the Seattle area this week for a brief trip to celebrate Laurie’s dad’s birthday with her family. Everyone has their tales of travel woes, but as you know we have a particularly eventful history with traveling. Not having gone anywhere for 2 years plus the renewed threat of COVID made this trip feel stressful. The day before we left I checked on the car rental reservation we had made 2 months ago. It was fine. But then while I was on the rental company’s web site, everything changed. Suddenly they said they could not find our reservation. I tried everything I could think of to fix this, to no avail. I started having that, “Oh no, it’s happening again” feeling. You know about all the horror stories that people have been having with renting cars. Not having a rental car was going to seriously gum up the works of this trip. I checked Travelocity. No cars available for these dates. Looked at another site, same result. I started seriously stressing as I began considering options. Maybe we could rent a Uhaul truck. The stress was making me feel tired already. Then I briefly remembered what I’m preaching. Okay, Lord, I can’t control this, but you can. You have this trip go the way you want. I got calmer. I decided to try one more site. This seemed silly because I had checked it weeks ago and they had no cars. But I tried anyway and to my surprise I found they had some cars available. There was just one problem. The price they would charge suggested they thought I was buying the car, not renting it.

Another important step in experiencing God’s strength is to believe he can and will give us strength, and then to ask him for it. Paul talked about being content in all situations, good or bad, in Philippians 4. In verse 13 he said, “I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” Remember, Paul was a prisoner when he wrote that. He believed God would give him the strength to be content even as he dealt with an unjust, cruel hardship.

Nehemiah was given the task of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem after the city had been destroyed in an earlier invasion. Israel still had enemies who wanted no part of that city being rebuilt. So some of them plotted against Nehemiah, trying to lure him into a trap where they could harm or even kill him. Then they planted rumors falsely accusing that Nehemiah and the other Jews were planning a revolt. They tried to use physical threats to scare him. In Nehemiah 6:9 he wrote, “They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, ‘Their hands will get too weak for the work and it will not be completed.’ But I prayed, ‘Now strengthen my hands.’” He asked God for strength. Psalm 86:16 asks of the Lord, “Oh grant your strength to your servant.” Notice that in Ephesians 3:16 Paul prayed that God would strengthen his people. We should ask the same for ourselves.

One more thing we should do to experience God’s strength. In Matthew 6:34 Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” One thing that saps the strength from us is looking ahead, seeing the long road and feeling like we can’t make it. I just need to try to do the best I can today. Once I get through today, I’ll do the same thing tomorrow. When you just think about doing what you need to do today, you realize that you can do that.

CONCLUSION

Have you heard of a young man named Welles Crowther? All through his career as a young athlete he always wore a red bandanna his father had given him. It became his signature. After he graduated from college he worked as an equities trader in the South tower of the World Trade Center. When United Flight 175 rammed that building and cut a fatal swath between floors 78 and 85, Crowther was on floor 104. The 24 year old Welles, wearing his red bandanna, gathered up survivors, putting one injured woman on his back and led them down 17 flights of stairs until he found some firefighters, who led them the rest of the way to safety. Then he went back upstairs. He found more survivors, including Judy Wein, who had a broken arm, broken ribs and a punctured lung. Welles put out some fires, gathered the survivors and again led them down to the firefighters. Then he went back up again. He never made it out. His body was found 6 months later. One woman keeps a photo of him in her home. She says, “Without him, I wouldn’t be here. He saved my life. He will always be in my heart.” Judy Wein says of him, “People can live 100 years and not have the compassion…to do what he did.” The 9/11 museum has his story along with his red bandanna on display. He gave what he had, in his case, his very life, to love others.

God calls us to have as the one thing we do, beyond loving him, to love others. To love them is to serve them, care for them, meet their needs. To do that sacrificially day in and day out is not natural or easy. But it is possible. It is possible when our food, that which sustains our lives is doing the will of God. In his grace in Christ God gives us all the food we need. He fills us with his love, his goodness, his provision, and his strength. Surely since we now have more than we could ever need, we can share out of it with others. ‘Tis the season, not to be jolly, but to be serving. It’s loving season. Let’s make the most of it.